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SUBJECT: Uzbek Foreign Minister on Medvedev Visit

REF: a) MOSCOW 220

CLASSIFIED BY: Nicholas Berliner, Pol-Econ Chief; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Uzbek Foreign Minister Norov met with the Ambassador for over ninety minutes on January 29 for a wide ranging discussion that included Russian President Medvedev's visit to Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, NDN, relations with Tajikistan and regional issues. Norov expressed satisfaction with the Medvedev visit, adding that constructive Uzbek relations with Russia were not at the expense of the U.S. or anyone else. He also noted that messages from President Obama have been received positively in this part of the world and said that Uzbekistan was looking forward to engagement with the new Administration; President Karimov will meet with Gen. Petraeus on Feb. 17, he said. End Summary.

Overall, the Medvedev Visit "a success"

¶2. (C) Norov spoke positively about the January 22-23 visit to Uzbekistan of Russian President Medvedev (noting that the visit had come at the request of the Russian side). He said that, given Russia's historical role in Central Asia and economic and cultural ties, it was essential for Uzbekistan to have constructive relations with Russia, but that Uzbekistan would nevertheless pursue its interests independently of Russia. He pointed to his government's decision to withdraw from EURASEC as an example of this independence, which he said the Russians had accepted. (He noted that the problem with EURASEC was not political, but simply that it duplicated other fora, had not accomplished anything, and was not worth the cost of a sizeable secretariat in Almaty.) Although Norov admitted that several key issues concerning energy and investment remained unresolved, he said that the visit should put to rest speculation that Uzbekistan and Russia are at odds. He characterized it as a positive development for bilateral relations with the U.S. when Uzbek-Russian relations are harmonious.

Afghanistan

¶3. (C) The situation in Afghanistan was a major topic of discussion between Karimov and Medvedev, according to Norov. He said that Uzbekistan supports the U.S. in Afghanistan and welcomes the priority the new Administration has given to resolving the situation there. He reported Medvedev as having said to Karimov that it was important for the U.S. and NATO to resolve the situation in Afghanistan and then leave as quickly as possible. Norov reported that Karimov, citing a "contradiction" in Russia's position, told Medvedev that this was an unrealistic expectation given the massive investments in Afghanistan made by the U.S. and others. Norov also explained that Uzbekistan had agreed to the Russian proposal for a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) discussion of Afghanistan in Moscow in March. However, the GOU was and remains skeptical of this idea, according to Norov, as it was of previous attempts to bring Afghanistan into discussions in the Collective Security Treat Organization (CSTO). While citing Karimov's "6 plus 3" formula, Norov said it was his expectation that the U.S. and NATO would participate in the SCO meeting, as would Afghanistan in the capacity of "guest." He said Uzbekistan had not yet decided whether to participate. Norov questioned what the SCO could bring to the table in terms of resources to address the Afghanistan issue, the reason, he said, for Uzbekistan's initial opposition to the idea of SCO or CSTO involvement.

¶4. (C) Norov again made the point that Uzbekistan does not see a military solution to the Afghan problem. He distanced Tashkent from press speculation that Russia is pressing Kyrgyzstan to close the base at Manas, and reaffirmed Uzbek support for what the U.S. is doing in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he said that corruption of the Karzai government is well-known and that an increased and prolonged foreign military presence would have the effect of driving more Afghans into the arms of the Taliban. He claimed the Russians were driving a wedge between the U.S. and President Karzai, but only to undermine the U.S. What is needed above all, he said, is investment that will address the socio-economic problems of the Afghan people. The Ambassador suggested that the upcoming visit to Uzbekistan by CENTCOM Commander General Petraeus would be a good opportunity for the GOU to hear first hand the multi-faceted U.S. strategy for stabilizing Afghanistan. Norov confirmed that President Karimov will receive Gen. Petraeus.

¶5. (C) Turning to President Obama's interview on Al-Arabiya, Norov said that these messages were received positively in this part of the world. He advised that the best way to have good relations in this region was to listen.

Northern Distribution Network (NDN)

16. (C) On the subject of NDN, Norov handed over a diplomatic note with a proposed exchange of letters (e-mailed to State and DOD). He said that while he understood the U.S. preference for simplicity, this was not possible in the Uzbek context and that it was important given the legalistic mindset within the GOU (especially at Customs and the Border Guards) to have legal clarity on transit. On the subject of the mechanism by which the Uzbek side would need to be notified of shipments, Norov expressed understanding for the concern that sending individual diplomatic notes for every container would be overly cumbersome and suggested that notes covering a specific period of time might be acceptable. He said the GOU was ready to receive a technical delegation to discuss the issue further and that he hoped it would be resolved in advance of the expected February 17 visit of General Petraeus. Norov also addressed the question of revisiting the GOU's exclusion of charter flights from Navoi airport to Afghanistan, citing an Uzbek proverb to the effect that one should take one bite at a time. (Comment: We take this to mean that we should not expect a reversal on this position now, but neither should we exclude the possibility in the future. The important thing is to lock in existing gains. Overall, our sense is that Norov wants to "check the box" on an agreement so that shipments can begin.)

17. (C) In the context of this discussion, Norov also cited the importance of NDN having a positive economic impact for Uzbekistan. He emphasized the importance of local purchase, criticizing the Germans for importing beer and water from Germany when good alternatives are available in Uzbekistan cheaply. Perhaps to underscore the point, he added that the absence of local purchase was one of the factors that undermined support for the U.S. presence at the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base. He warned that a logjam was looming as supplies converge on Khairaton and recommended that work to upgrade transport infrastructure in Afghanistan begin soon.

#### Water a Key Issue -----

18. (C) From the Uzbek perspective, the single most important development to emerge from the visit was Medvedev's statement that all affected countries in the region must be consulted regarding the construction of hydro-electric power facilities in upstream countries (i.e. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). Water is a life or death issue in Uzbekistan and the GOU had been very concerned by reports of Russian financial support and construction of upstream hydro facilities. According to Norov, Karimov told Medvedev that he believed Russia was trying to control water resources in Central Asia and even went so far as to tell Medvedev that Uzbekistan would block shipments of Russian equipment bound for Tajikistan if Uzbekistan was not given independent guarantees that planned projects would not adversely affect downstream users. According to Norov, Karimov had earlier persuaded China to cancel plans to build dams in the region and had compensated the Chinese for the lost business - an indication of how seriously the Uzbeks took this "threat" to their vital interests. Although the Uzbeks may attach more significance to Medvedev's statement than is warranted, official Tashkent clearly views this as Russia having come around to the Uzbek position on this issue.

#### Relations with Tajikistan -----

19. (C) Discussions of water issues inevitably led Norov to the subject of relations with Tajikistan. When asked by the Ambassador about reports that Uzbekistan had failed to facilitate the Tajik purchase of Turkmen power, Norov cited "technical problems" but added that the real problem lay in the fact that Tajikistan did not use its own power efficiently. He cited the absence of a fee collection system and said large amounts of power are provided to the TALCO aluminum plant at rates lower than those paid by Tajik consumers and whose emissions most directly affect people in Uzbekistan (Note: The GOU has put up billboards in Tashkent portraying children playing in a cloud of filth from TALCO and calling on Tajikistan to close the plant. End note.)

110. (C) Expounding further on the difficulties in Uzbekistan's relationship with Tajikistan, Norov accused Tajik President Rahmon of stoking irredentism. He cited a televised event in honor of a famous "Tajik" poet from Bukhara over which Rahmon presided from a "throne", indicating that he is intent on "re-creating a cult of personality on the model of Niyazov." Worse still, according to Norov, was a song in praise of Tajikistan "from Dushanbe to Bukhara." Norov, himself from Bukhara and of Tajik ethnicity, termed such policies dangerous and said that Uzbekistan, unlike Russia, would never play the ethnicity card in relations with its neighbors, despite the existence of Uzbek minorities in all four other Central Asian states. He emphasized that, despite these problems, Uzbekistan sought constructive relations with its neighbors, pointing out that the GOU sells gas to Tajikistan at \$240/tcm, or \$100 below the price Russia pays for Uzbek gas. The fundamental problem that must be resolved before all others, Norov said, is the demarcation of the border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

#### Iranian Influence in Tajikistan -----

111. (C) As an exclamation point to his diatribe against the Tajik government, Norov said that Iran represented a dangerous influence there. Using cultural and linguistic ties, the Iranians are making inroads in Tajikistan, according to Norov, and having success in converting formerly Sunni Tajiks to Shi'ism. This is a policy that Tajik President Rahmon is actively pursuing, setting a very dangerous precedent of injecting potential religious conflict into the region. He accused the Tajiks of preparing to host Iranian President Ahmadinejad or planning a state visit to Tehran by President Rahmon in March.

#### Economic Issues -----

112. (C) Norov was again self-congratulatory in extolling the wisdom of Uzbekistan's "go slow" economic policies, saying that these had spared Uzbekistan from the worst of the global financial crisis. Unlike Kazakhstan, where economic growth would be flat or negative, he said that the Uzbek economy would continue to grow in 2009. Referring to talks with Medvedev, he noted energy and the visits of Lukoil CEO Alekperov and Gazprom CEO Miller at the same time. He said that Uzbekistan was satisfied with its cooperation with both companies and that they expected greater energy exports in the future. (Although Norov did not address this question, it was reported that Karimov agreed to Russian demands of exclusivity on Uzbek gas exports.) The GOU, for its part, would like to see more diverse Russian investment (over 90 percent has been in the energy sector), but talks about cooperation in the aviation sector were

inconclusive, according to Norov. He said Uzbek participation in a joint venture involving the Tashkent aircraft factory with Russia's United Aircraft Corporation would depend on whether agreement could be reached on a guaranteed number of orders for the Ilyushin 114 regional passenger turboprop aircraft produced in Tashkent.

Comment

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¶13. (C) We agree with the assessment that the Medvedev visit was positive for the GOU and also for U.S. interests. Statements supportive of the new Administration's direction on Afghanistan from both Medvedev and Karimov give us needed political momentum to secure agreement on transit through Uzbekistan. It is important to note Norov's comments on local purchase. This is a key issue for the Uzbeks and we should make every effort to ensure that some supplies are procured locally as a part of NDN. Doing so will enhance our position and also increase the likelihood that we may be able to expand air transit to Afghanistan from Uzbekistan sometime in the future.

¶14. (C) To the extent that the Medvedev visit quieted rumors of Uzbekistan's westward drift, this leaves the GOU with a freer hand to develop relations with the U.S., although relations with Russia are inevitably not far from the minds GOU officials. Medvedev left Tashkent with promises of exclusive rights to Uzbek gas and, in exchange, the Uzbeks got needed reassurances on water. Who controls water is a key political issue for Uzbekistan and the region and, for that reason, it is also an easy lever that Russia can use to foment discord among the states of Central Asia. This was just the latest act.

NORLAND

To view the entire SMART message, go to URL [http://repository.state.sgov.gov/\\_layouts/OSS\\_SearchResults.aspx?k=messageid:0e4f8f58-1101-451b-80](http://repository.state.sgov.gov/_layouts/OSS_SearchResults.aspx?k=messageid:0e4f8f58-1101-451b-80)